Involving Teachers in Curriculum Change

In this day of accountability, principals have the never-ending job of aligning local curriculum with national and state curriculum standards. It can be a long journey from identifying curriculum in need of alignment to the full implementation of a program that not only is aligned with the standards but also meets the needs of the students and teachers.

During the past six years, our school district has adopted new programs in just about every curriculum area. Since my protégé and I both have responsibilities in regard to teacher supervision and evaluation, we discussed what full implementation of each curriculum change should and would look like in the classroom. We wanted to avoid what many schools have experienced—partial, half-hearted, or ineffective implementation. Our discussions were based on the firm belief that our school is organized around student learning, and our goal was to adopt the best practices that meet the needs of our young learners.

We are fortunate to have a very dedicated and talented staff that is truly tuned in to students’ needs. Starting with the adoption and implementation of a standards-based math program six years ago, our teachers have been involved with a great deal of professional development involving direct instruction, study groups, coaching, and the formation of professional learning communities. Some teachers have embraced new curriculum programs more than others, even though the administrative expectation is that all programs are to be fully implemented. Although there is some leeway for teachers to add their own style and creative flare to the curriculum, we felt it was necessary for them to use a common language and strategies in helping students reach established curriculum benchmarks.

Anne and I agreed that once we had successfully completed the management aspect of our positions by arranging for professional development and coaching, securing substitute teachers to cover classes, purchasing kits and materials, and offering our assistance in obtaining resources, it was time for our instructional leadership to kick in. As a mentor in NAESP’s Peer Assisted Leadership Services, I challenged my protégé to devise a plan that would allow us to make sure that our programs were being implemented and that our students were receiving the full benefit of our district’s substantial investment in professional development and curriculum changes.

—Linda Balfour

New to Principal. This new column features the perspectives of two principals—a mentor and a protégé—as they reflect on how they approached a single school leadership issue.

Linda and I wanted to see the same things in our classrooms—content and instruction that ensured student achievement and success. That, of course, was the reason that we had spent six years aligning and updating our curriculum! The question now was: How do we manage to see all of these changes in action, given our many other responsibilities as administrators? We did not want this to be a component of the formal evaluation. Our desire was to see where teachers were in their classroom practice so that we could identify needs and help those who needed further assistance in the implementation process. At the same time, we needed to get across clearly that full implementation was a mandate, not a choice.

I proposed the idea of conducting walkthroughs focused on a particular area of the literacy curriculum. We would then be in a better position to discuss classroom practice and address any needs not covered by our professional development.

We identified five areas of the literacy curriculum we wanted to see “up close and personal” in the classrooms: grade-level classroom libraries; spelling; phonics; reader’s workshop; and writer’s workshop. We set a day for each focus area with the goal of observing the teachers implementing the curriculum and ensuring that they were using appropriate language and strategies. Each of us scheduled a 15- to 20-minute period to visit half of the classrooms. After comparing notes, we were able to identify those teachers who needed further assistance—or encouragement. We then continued our walkthroughs to observe the curriculum areas we had outlined.

These focused walkthroughs have enhanced my instructional leadership skills. Our observations were turned into action plans that engaged not only the classroom teachers and administrators, but also our reading specialist. These visits provided a format for us to let the teachers know that expectations are high and standards are firm, that support is available to help them meet the standards, and that the bottom line is, “It’s all about the students and their learning!”

—Anne MacKenzie

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Linda Balfour and Anne MacKenzie are mentor and protégé in the Peer Assisted Leadership Service (PALS)—a program where experienced school leaders mentor new and aspiring principals. For more information, visit www.naesp.org.
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